

**Political Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporations Ethics in
the Confessional Democracy System of Lebanon**

by Rayan Merkbawi

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
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Under the supervision of Professor Carl Rhodes and Professor Bronwen Dalton

University of Technology Sydney

Faculty of Management

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Declaration of Originality

I, Rayan Merkbawi, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the Business School/Faculty of Management at the University of Technology Sydney. This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Preface

Where I come from, people do not live a full existence, they simply survive, facing one tragedy after another. I was lucky to have survived twenty-four years of my life in Lebanon, my birthplace. This thesis whilst on Political Corporate Social Responsibility is also my story as a Lebanese researcher living in Australia, remembering Lebanon daily. In this story, my words will give a window into the daily life of Lebanese people. This is very much an account of how we have to face and build on fear and trauma, and an inbuilt resilience to be seen, to be heard, to be identified, and to arrive at some place where you can breathe and live a life of possibility.

This is my story.

I have repeatedly been asked why I left Lebanon. In some ways I can quickly respond, and in others I fall silent. My responses differ based on my mental and emotional state at the time of questioning. Often my strategy is to answer as briefly as possible with short sentences ‘for better future’, ‘to explore a new country’, ‘for better education’, but never did I provide an honest answer, ever. It seems that even the ability to speak of the Lebanese experience, is governed. Now that I am elsewhere, I write to speak. Some people say, 'what does not kill you makes you stronger,' but I find this saying absurd. Nobody had ever explained how to live in the aftermath or how someone could become stronger when we are constantly in fear. How do we become strong in the diaspora? Displaced, fragmented and struggling to make meaning. My story started the day I was born. However, on the 23rd of August 2013 life changed forever. When I changed forever, and so this day marks a point of time which has made me who and where I am today.

It was a quiet Friday afternoon, I left work early for a quick lunch with my friends in Beirut before heading back to my hometown in north Lebanon. Usually,

Friday is the day when all southern and northern workers who work in the capital Beirut return to their hometown to spend the weekend with their families. My friends and I met in a nice restaurant where all the filthy rich Lebanese bourgeois moor their multi-million-dollar boats. Only a few miles away, people live in dire poverty in an overcrowded urban area. Two areas located within miles away from each other reflect a complete contradictory reality that simply summarise Lebanese society.

My sister called that afternoon whilst I was at the restaurant to ask if I am coming to dinner. The line was cut off, so I walked a few steps away from my friends, and the music of jazz played in the restaurant. It was then that I heard a loud sound, like of a bomb. This sound of the bomb was clear, but also real that the movement from the bomb could blow my ears. At this moment I heard her scream 'the house is down' before it was complete silence. My brain could not process that one flash moment. I tried to call again, and again but all telephone lines were disconnected in the District. That moment my feet let me down, I did not have the strengths to take a few steps to get to my car, my heart was pounding as if it is beating outside my chest. I froze there, on the street. My friend whispered the breaking news as if preparing me to what I am going to hear 'there was a bomb explosion targeting worship place in Tripoli'. This place sat across the road from my parents' house. My friend continued, 'but I am sure they are fine'.

I stood there, cold, unable to move without any reaction. I remember my friends' pale faces and teary eyes. As I think back, this was the moment when my whole world exploded. Frozen, cold, the kind of cold that turned my fingers blue amid the hottest days of summer. At that moment, nothing made sense, not even my unexplained cold fingers during the summer heat. That moment stretched out for what feels like forever, with the voice in my head questioning 'How could someone put a bombed car in a

highly secured street of political figures and police surveillance around the clock? My parents live in one of what considered a 'safe zone' area in the district where many MPs, political, social and army figures live, and it was under 24/7 protection.

Driving home, a trip that usually takes half an hour through traffic jams lasted two hours, but it felt like two years. On the way, the radio broadcasted the news, and the reporter was describing the scene, the massive destruction, the countless dead bodies, the blood, the screams and the complete chaos. I arrived in my neighbourhood, where I could barely recognise anything at all: a cloud of dust and smoke, the rubble, the screams, the armed civilians, and the wounded people covered in blood and dust. I stopped my car hundreds of meters away and raced to my house - my heart carried me there. When I arrived home, the explosion had blown out the glass from balconies and windows from the entire house, injuring my nephew and niece and almost killed my father. That day many lives were lost, hundreds injured, dozens were missing. I lost dear neighbours, friends, and beloved people.

The assignment of blame and pointing fingers was refracted through sectarian neighbouring country loyalty's group a few hours after the explosion. However, the most painful reality in this horrific tragedy is that only two days later the victims were buried, with some families did not have bodies to bury, but life was somehow back to normal. Except for those who lost their loved ones who were grieving and mourning in silence. The investigation was closed, no one was held accountable, and in the public realm the bomb was just simply forgotten.

For many, life was stopped there. For others they were merely surviving. For me, part of me died there. When I close my eyes, I still remember this tragedy and the smell of the rubble and dust like others of my age remember their favourite movie, favourite memory or favourite perfume. I remember the feeling of fear, confusion,

weakness, hate, and these feelings were dangerously mixed inside my heart. As I type these words, these emotions surface, my heart racing. And, over time, I have wanted answers and justice.

In simple terms the political system of Lebanon is too complicated, too corrupt and too negligent. For the system, our life as citizen is worthless, whether alive or dead, we are just numbers. We are the voice that threat and shake its crumbling throne, yet win us over and manage to silence us every time, at any cost. Is this what normal life is for us? The older generations went through many wars, series of political assassinations and explosions, that they became accustomed to the situation. This is the only life they knew, full of terror, horror and death that normalised their understanding of life and lifestyle. After the 2013 bombing, life was too quickly back to normal, but mine stopped there. That day I decided to leave, to run, to start over, to forget the fear, the bomb.

Arriving in Australia was my new chapter, but I was not ready to forget the past. I experienced being caught in-between between living a free life, and remembering the past, my homeland. Perhaps, I was not fully prepared, but I needed to break free from the society that did not resemble me – a system that would structure my personal capabilities on an ethnic basis, and my emotions, identity, morality. A system that introduced me to death at a very young age. How did this lead to me pursuing a PhD degree? I have always had a strong dedication to understanding the structural inequality of the Lebanese system, lack of social justice of this fragmented society, and the politicisation of every aspect of life has been my fundamental resistance that was not very ‘accepted’ or welcomed. My passions, curiosity and critical thinking have greatly been influenced by a professor I met when taking a leadership class in my previous degree. Alison was the source of my inspiration. Her critical character, and fearless toned voice, triggered the fear I had buried inside. She made me question and redefine

the normality of the life I had known, question the characteristics of leaders, and what to expect from leaders. I wrote many reflective letters in my leadership class, where I put my feelings into words for the very first time that made me reconnect with myself. I felt I had a voice even when I was the only listener. Alison unknowingly helped me discover my true identity and made me reconsider that I exist, and I am capable, and I can be heard.

After doing research projects in my master's degree, I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to relate or understand many research areas such as ethics, social responsibility, social contributions. For me, sense-making was my primary challenge, there was a huge gap between my textbooks (always western) and my reality of fleeing from Lebanon. I was increasingly interested in corporations involved in the political sphere to tackle social needs. The general optimistic framing of corporations' social contributions in western societies seemed unreal or rather fictional for me. Lebanon was understudied in many research areas, and thus lacked representation.

I spent a whole year researching Political Corporate Social Responsibility, a concept and practice that I had not heard before in my country. Narrowing my areas of interest into a workable and achievable PhD study was very difficult. I thought a PhD will be a daring and new challenge. I survived a risky life in my country, not knowing if I am waking up next morning or which bomb or kind of explosion am gonna die from. So, why wouldn't I survive a PhD? I remember the first time I met with Carl, my supervisor, and we had a long discussion. Little he knew about me, but he understood what I was trying to say. I remember his words 'When you enter into the PhD program, and when you complete it, you are not the same person'. Carl was referring to academic knowledge and career, but what he meant and what I wanted to understand at that time were two different things. I thought I needed this change to reconnect with myself and

finally flip that last page. I also remember I went home very unsure. I was unsure or perhaps feeling incapable. I also felt awkwardly guilty for leaving Lebanon, guilty for surviving in Lebanon. Guilty for being fortunate to have a chance to start over; while probably hundreds of women who are the same age as mine; have the same capabilities still stuck there. Most of all, I felt angry at myself for doubting myself.

The next day, I woke up eager to bringing about the changes that I wish to see in Lebanon. The voices that must be heard, the fractured society that many do not know it exists, the neglect and the fear that is built-in inside everyone from the moment they are born, and that I feel so strongly about. A PhD seemed an obvious way to do this. I was curious to find answers, curious to understand and read my own reality in the way that actually makes sense. It took me months to find a corporation that would agree to participate in my research. It was a kind of mission impossible, but I was already prepared for this. I contacted a corporate through my network in Lebanon. A few days later, its HR department called me to understand the nature of the research, though I had sent them all the required documents in advance. I felt I was being investigated until two of their long-listed conditions stopped me 'The HR will have access to the participants' interviews responses' and 'the research must present the CEO in his best image'. So, I ended the call apologetically that their conditions conflict with the confidential nature of the research, and it was my last contact with this corporate. After many long hopeless inquiries, one corporation out of 24 corporations I had contacted in 2018, finally agreed to take part in this research, of course, with a list of terms to take into consideration. In 2018, I arrived in Lebanon for Data collection. This time I was in Lebanon as a foreign researcher, and I had a task that I was dedicated to complete. It was a challenging experience when at the beginning of every interview, I had to reassure each participant that my study is confidential, their identity will be protected,

and their names will be anonymised. However, some participants wanted different guarantees where I had to share all contact numbers in Australia, others asked me to swear by 'God' or begged me not to tell the owner of the corporate what they said. During data collection, I experienced a different type of fear this time. It was the fear of speaking out that could cost them their jobs, their ability to provide for their families and survive the terrible economy. It was the kind of fear that makes you realise how the system deprived the community of their basic rights so they would silently accept the little they are given: no objection, no resistance, no headache. Though the participants' sample was random, they all had something in common, the feeling of helplessness, the negative fatalism that is associated with feeling unimportant or unrecognised. Many interviews ended with me being interviewed by the participants who were asking of any migration information to Australia or any other country 'How can we migrate to Australia'? 'Are immigration applications currently open'? I was in no position to share any information, and they were aware of this. They wanted to run and leave everything behind like I ran away from the fear years ago. They felt like foreign strangers in their own Lebanon. I came back to Australia with a strange feeling of commitment, obligation and responsibility. There was never a moment of hesitation or escape.

Doing a PhD in social science is triggering. Years of work that result in a thesis and maybe several published papers - presents many insecurities and opportunities to fail. It is coupled with isolated dedication – a confronting self-reflexive pain. This journey was full of setback, but a beautiful escape into a different world. For me, this journey was my secret battle. A battle that starts against my old self, my fear and my helplessness. A struggle to be heard that made me resist the culture of death I lived and survived. This journey was full of mixed feelings. What kept me going is my refusal to look back, to stay trapped in my own fear. I was dedicated to moving forward.

I felt committed to reflecting on the ‘other’ reality that many do not know it exists. However, many emotions were put aside in this journey, I was looking from a different perspective where I put integrity and ethics as the top personal responsibility in this journey.

Writing my story is the most confronting experience in my entire life. Now that the journey is coming to an end, it feels like the cherry on top of a very challenging journey. I thought this story would remain untold, safely hidden in my subconscious as my life is supposedly going on normally with a cheerful smile and blurry eyes. I really wanted my book to look like another thesis of another PhD candidate journey—a candidate who is identified by name but not a story. I hesitated to write my story because it is not a pleasant one to tell. It took me a lot of strength and courage – but as I was struggling to write about my trauma that kept me captive for seven-year.

In recent days, a warehouse of stored ammonium nitrate has exploded at the Port of Beirut, in one of the most crowded areas of the capital. This explosion is the third biggest explosion in history after Hiroshima and destroyed almost a third of the capital. Two hundred died, seven thousand injured, and more than 300,000 families became homeless. These families cannot afford to rebuild, and definitely cannot afford to leave. It was 3:00 a.m. in AEST when I found out about the explosion. I close my eyes, wishing it is just a bad dream. It was not.

The negligence, corruption, greed and dehumanisation of the system’s rulers have finally exploded in the civilians. When I thought I was finally healing, all pain and anger came back to me at once. It gave me the strength to finish off my story. You will find this story here.

A PhD degree is a message before it is a career. This message reflects the reality of the vicious cycle of Lebanon, and it must be delivered.

This research involved a single qualitative interview and non-participant observation-based approach investigating political corporate social responsibility (PCSR). Qualitative research was the best method for this study because it enabled a systematic explanation of many different phenomena. A case study is an investigative method using an established set of procedures to answer research questions, collect evidence and reveal previously undiscovered evidence. Case studies are particularly useful for obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviour and social contexts of populations.

Existing research on the political perspective of corporate social responsibility in Lebanon is inadequate and rather non-existing. I was repeatedly asked about the motives of investigating PCSR in Lebanon and presuming that it does not fit the picture of the topic. I was fully aware of the challenges that will accompany this, particularly in the contextual complexity of the political setting in Lebanon. However, as a Lebanese I would understand the suffering, the lifestyles, challenges, threats, and fears of the communities at the centre of this study. The injustice and oppression inequality outweighs the astonishment of the study findings. This thesis was inductive in nature so that the theory was derived from the Data itself. The Gramscian theory (1970) of hegemony was the most suitable theoretical perspective that would mirror the empirical findings due to the socio-political environment and the capitalistic features of Lebanon.

I determined that a single qualitative case study was the most appropriate method for exploring, collecting and analysing data and drawing conclusions. The sample size was 24 participants, comprising employees of a private corporation contracted to deliver public services in Tripoli District, community social activists, state council members from the North Governorate in Tripoli District and an expert environmental engineer.

The population selected for this study included personnel in the employ of the company for 1–17 years at various levels of authority and degrees of involvement in decision-making. State council members selected for the study had been elected by the residents of North Governorate and were familiar with the environmental concerns of that area. The environmental engineer was a former member of council and a social activist who was aware of both the responsibilities of the council and the obligations of corporations.

All town council members, environmental experts and social activists were residents of the town. They lived there before, during and after the company's contract. Written records and audio and media devices were used to collect data in face-to-face and written correspondence interviews with employees, government representatives, social activists and environmental engineer. Together, these groups formed a balanced representation of the community.

Abstract

Political corporate social responsibility (PCSR) has been extensively researched in the past decade, with growing interest in the increased involvement of private corporations in influencing government regulations as well as providing public goods. Numerous studies have examined these phenomena from various theoretical perspectives and in many contexts. However, Middle Eastern countries have yet to be fully considered, despite the evident corporate involvement in the political sphere. The current study was motivated by the lack of current research on PCSR in Lebanon, one of the most politically unstable Middle Eastern countries and extends the research that has been typically conducted in Western or emerging economies settings.

Although PCSR researchers have started to explore the influence of culture and religion, they have not yet examined the influence of politics on the social responsibilities of corporations in settings dominated by ethnicity and religion. Lebanon's political system is characterised by a confessional government comprising democratic proportional representation of various religious and ethnic groups.

The purpose of this study was to discover and evaluate factors connecting corporate social responsibility (CSR) to politics in Lebanon, one of the most politically divided and culturally and religiously diverse countries in the region. It extends PCSR theory to account for contexts in which the political effects of CSR are subject to cultural and religious conditions.

A qualitative research interview and non-participant observation-based approach was used to conduct a single case study in Lebanon's two largest cities, Beirut and Tripoli. Through the lens of Gramscian theory of hegemony, I investigate the mechanisms underlying PCSR in Lebanon where a strong connection between social elitism, economic status, politics and religion occurs. This study examined public-

private partnerships, which involve private corporations delivering public services by means of contractual agreements with the Lebanese government. It sheds light on corporate responses to social needs and services in a failed government setting and a dynamically complex social, political and multi-sectarian setting.

This thesis provides a new perspective on the political roles and responsibilities of corporations, extending current theories on CSR. It conceptualises a more complex and dynamic picture of corporate responses to political demands than that presented in the literature, drawing on a less optimistic framework and revealing crucial insights into the darker picture of dysfunctional corporate practice and a weak political system.

Keywords: CSR, political CSR, political theory, PCSR in Lebanon, neo-Gramscian hegemony theory, confessional democracy, consociationalism, Middle East.

List of Abbreviations

CDR	Council of Development and Reconstruction
CEO	Chief executive officer
CPA	Corporate political activity
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
HR	Human resources
IT	Information technology
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MNC	Multinational corporation
MP	Member of parliament
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PCSR	Political corporate social responsibility
PPP	Public–private partnership
PR	Public relations
SWM	Solid waste management
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TEDO	Tripoli Environmental and Development Observatory
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
US	United States